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ABSTRACT

Using Quay's typology, three equal groups (n=12) of adolescent psychopathic, neurotic, and subcultural delinquent males and a matched nondelinquent control group were individually administered Kohlberg's structured moral dilemmas, two Piagetian tasks of cognitive development (pendulum and balance), and an adaption of Flavell's role-taking task. Psychopathic delinquents were more immature in level of moral development than all other groups which did not differ from one another. Psychopathic delinquents were significantly more concrete in their thinking on cognitive tasks than all other groups who exhibited signs of early formal operational thinking. Psychopathic and to a lesser extent neurotic delinquents were deficient in role taking compared with controls and subculturals who did not differ from one another. The findings provide further evidence against viewing delinquency as a unitary syndrome of deviance. (Author)

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The Relationship of Moral and Cognitive Development to Dimensions of Juvenile Delinquency

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Abstract

Using Quay's typology, three equal groups (n=12) of adolescent psychopathic, neurotic, and subcultural delinquent males and a matched nondelinquent control group were individually administered Kohlberg's structured moral dilemmas, two Piagetian tasks of cognitive development (pendulum and balance), and an adaptation of Flavell's role-taking task. Psychopathic delinquents were more immature in level of moral development than all other groups which did not differ from one another. Psychopathic delinquents were significantly more concrete in their thinking on cognitive tasks than all other groups who exhibited signs of early formal operational thinking. Psychopathic and to a lesser extent neurotic delinquents were deficient in role taking compared with controls and subculturals who did not differ from one another. The findings provide further evidence against viewing delinquency as a unitary syndrome of deviance.

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The Relationship of Moral and Cognitive Development to Dimensions of Juvenile Delinquency

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The past decade has witnessed increased efforts to extend developmental concepts and methods to the study of childhood psychopathology (cf. Achenbach, 1974; Anthony, 1970; Herbert, 1974). For example, in the area of juvenile delinquency, investigators have examined the moral judgment and conduct of adolescent offenders from the cognitive-developmental perspective of Piaget (1932/1965) and Kohlberg (1964, 1969). A number of studies (e.g., Fodor, 1972; Hudgins & Prentice, 1973; Jurkovic & Prentice, 1974; Kohlberg, 1958) have compared undifferentiated groups of delinquent and nondelinquent boys on Kohlberg's moral dilemmas. Although delinquents in this research have tended to reason along more unconventional lines than nondelinquents, their reasoning is characterized by marked individual differences.

It is likely that investigations in this area have been confounded by the heterogeneity of delinquency as a form of behavioral deviance. Indeed, factor analytic studies conducted by Quay and his colleagues (see Quay & Parsons, 1971) have revealed three common subgroups or dimensions of delinquent youth: the unsocialized-psychopathic, the neurotic-disturbed, and the socialized-subcultural. Psychopathic delinquents are socially unresponsive and engage in antisocial

behavior that is accompanied by little guilt or remorse. Neurotic delinquents, on the other hand, are more socialized and act-out in response to inner conflicts resulting in extreme guilt, anxiety, and depression. Subcultural delinquents also appear to be reasonably well socialized but due to strained relations with parents are more responsive to their delinquency-prone peers than to authority figures. Research which has differentiated delinquents according to Quay's classification system has produced meaningful differences among the subclasses on a variety of personality, behavioral, learning, and familial variables (Quay, 1972). The current investigation addressed the moral and cognitive developmental aspects of these delinquent dimensions which have been largely ignored.

Method

From a pool of approximately 120 institutionalized delinquent boys (aged 12-17), three groups (N=12/group) of psychopathic, neurotic, and subcultural delinquents were formed using Quay's classification system. This system is based on behavioral, personality, and life history data. A matched normal control group of equal size was drawn from a public high school in a high delinquency area. Statistical analyses revealed that the groups were fairly well matched on all relevant variables except verbal ability. The nondelinquent group earned a significantly higher mean scaled score on the Vocabulary subtest of the WISC or WAIS than did the psychopathic, neurotic, and subcultural delinquent groups ($p < .025$). The delinquent groups did not differ from each

other ($p > .20$).

The boys were individually administered a variety of measures of moral and cognitive development. Maturity of moral judgment was evaluated with Kohlberg's structured moral dilemmas. The three dilemmas used in the current study concentrated primarily on issues relating to life, punishment, contract, personal relationships, property, and conscience. All moral dilemmas were scored following Kohlberg's (1972) detailed issue scoring guide. This scoring system allows responses to moral dilemmas to be translated into stage scores as well as into moral maturity scores (MMS) which are linked to the six stage sequence of moral development. The theoretical MMS range is 100-600.

Level of cognitive development was assessed with two tasks (balance and pendulum) used by Inhelder and Piaget (1958) to measure concrete and formal operational thought. The boys were given an opportunity to determine how the balance and pendulum worked through direct manipulation and then asked to verbalize and demonstrate their conclusions. Their responses were scored according to a 6-point scale adapted from Inhelder and Piaget (1958). The 6-point sequence corresponded to concrete preoperational substages IA and IB, concrete operational substages IIA and IIB, and formal operational substages IIIA and IIIB.

In addition, a slightly modified version of the role-taking task devised by Flavell (1968) was included to assess cognitive functioning in a nonmoral social situation. Two boxes with 10¢

printed on one and 5¢ on the other were presented to the boys. Each box contained the designated amount of money. The boys were instructed to take the money from either the dime or nickel box (while the experimenter was not looking) so as to trick the experimenter. The boys were further told that the experimenter was going to try to pick the box with the money left in it. Thus the object of the game was for the boys to predict which box the experimenter would choose. The role-taking task was scored on a 3-point scale developed by Selman (1971). A score of 1 reflected complete absence of role-taking ability, whereas a score of 3 reflected an awareness that role taking is reciprocal. For all tasks used in this study, acceptable levels of interrater reliability were obtained.

Results

To control statistically for group differences in verbal ability, the results were subjected to analyses of covariance with vocabulary score acting as the covariate. The groups differed significantly in moral maturity ($p < .025$). Comparisons between adjusted means revealed that the psychopathic delinquents relied upon more immature modes of moral reasoning (Stages 1 and 2) than the neurotic delinquents ($p < .10$), the subcultural delinquents ($p < .005$), and the nondelinquents ($p < .005$). The latter three groups displayed significant levels of Stage 3 thinking and did not differ from one another ($p > .10$).

Significant or nearly significant group differences were found

on the pendulum ($p < .025$) and balance ($p < .10$) tasks as well. Further analyses indicated that on both tasks the psychopathic delinquents were significantly more concrete in their thinking ($p < .005$) than the other groups of boys who all exhibited signs of early formal operational thinking. No other significant differences were found ($p > .20$).

A significant overall effect was also found for role-taking ability ($p < .025$). Additional comparisons between groups revealed that the psychopaths ($p < .005$) and, to a lesser extent, the neurotics ($p < .10$) were deficient in reciprocal role taking compared with the controls and subculturals. The controls and subculturals did not differ ($p > .20$).

Finally, a series of chi-square analyses were performed to assess the relationship of cognitive abilities on the role-taking (classified as reciprocal and nonreciprocal) and Piagetian (classified as formal operations and concrete operations) tasks to levels of moral judgment (classified as conventional and preconventional). In general, most of these tests were significant ($p < .05$).

Discussion

Results of this study are consistent with other empirical findings (Campagna & Harter, 1975; Fodor, 1973) and demonstrate that dimensions of delinquency can be conceptualized in meaningful cognitive developmental terms. For example, the indication that psychopathic delinquents are lagging behind both their delinquent and nondelinquent peers lends support to theorists (e.g., Buss, 1966; Foulds, 1965; Gough, 1948) who view these adolescents as

limited in their moral understanding of social behavior and in their capacity to assume the perspective of others. The presence of such cognitive restrictions in relating to people helps clarify why psychopathic youngsters can manipulate others for their own ends without experiencing guilt or remorse. For instance, when queried about the nature of conscience on one of Kohlberg's dilemmas, the psychopaths frequently oriented to the fear and anxiety associated with being apprehended for wrongdoing rather than to conventional level concerns of hurting or disappointing others expressed by many of the other adolescents. To quote one of the psychopathic boys:

> Conscience is feelings. Like if you shoot somebody, it stays on you. You know you're going to get caught. I don't have a real big conscience. I robbed a house one time and heard that I was going to get caught. It stayed on my mind.

The neurotic and subcultural delinquents in this study were at about the same level of moral and cognitive development as their non-delinquent counterparts. Yet, their social histories reflected demonstrably unconventional behavior, implying that the sociocognitive maturity of many adolescents is not highly associated with significant moral behaviors. More research is clearly needed to uncover the many internal as well as external variables which mediate the relationship between delinquency and development in the sociocognitive sphere.

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